

## **State Hears Call for Regional Planning**

In a land use summit convened in Orono last week by the State Planning Office, an array of professional planners and citizens strongly supported managing land use in Maine on a regional scale. A number of issues including affordable housing, designated growth areas, public water supplies and transportation were cited as better addressed on a region-wide basis, rather than by each individual town, as is now required by law.

It's been nearly twenty years since the Growth Management Act was enacted. To the credit of many dedicated people—planners, local planning committees, municipal officials, citizens—over 200 towns and cities in Maine now have comprehensive plans that are consistent with state goals laid out in the Growth Management Act. This is a tremendous achievement, and one that is the envy of many other states.

Despite our success, the need to update Maine's approach to land use planning is urgent. At stake is the very character of Maine. Strip malls and sprawling housing developments are replacing our walkable villages. Heavy development along the coast and in rural areas is forcing people out of traditional fishing, farming, and forestry jobs. The exodus of people from our cities to outlying rural areas is increasing taxpayer cost to build new roads and schools. Slow or stagnant growth in other parts of the state is driving growth – any kind of growth – rather than growth that is sustainable.

The Legislature saw a need for better planning and directed the State Planning Office to present recommendations by February, 2006. Last week, the State Planning Office took the first step by convening a land use summit. The event was held at the University of Maine at Orono and was attended by about one hundred people, representing local government, environmental groups, the Legislature, state agencies, and citizens interested in land use issues.

One of the outstanding features of the event was the diversity of regions and viewpoints represented by those attending. Planners and local officials came from Bangor, Brewer, Blue Hill, Brunswick, Ellsworth, Eliot, Falmouth, Greenville, Harpswell, Holden, Kennebunk Old Town, Portland, Saco, Searsport, Waldo, Windham, and Yarmouth. Legislators attending were Jim Schatz (D-Blue Hill), Brad Moulton (R-York), Bob Duchesne (D-Hudson), and Ted Koffman (D-Bar Harbor). A number of non-profit, advocacy agencies sent representatives including Maine Audubon, GrowSmart Maine, Maine Municipal Association, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, and Friends of Mid-Coast Maine. State agencies, real estate developers, regional councils, and a number of interested citizens made up the rest of the audience.

At the summit, the State Planning Office asked for ideas to improve land use planning in Maine. People worked in small groups for two days and came up with over sixty proposals. Most of the proposals fell into one of six categories: 1) regional planning, 2) protection of natural resources, 3) clarifying state land use policies and standards, 4) greater flexibility in local land use planning strategies, 5) increased incentives and funding, and 6) a more proactive approach to planning. A straw poll showed that the

group thought regional planning was the highest priority among these, followed by greater local flexibility and protecting natural resources.

The summit kicks off of a six-month public process to develop new approaches to land use planning. Focus groups and additional public meetings will be scheduled in the fall. Public comments are welcome on the State Planning Office Web site at [www.maine.gov/spo/landuse](http://www.maine.gov/spo/landuse).